

# Addressing the Preconditions: Women's Rights and Development

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'Gender equality' may have made it into the language of mainstream development. But in most parts of the world, inequalities between women and men in the workplace, in political institutions and in the home have proven exasperatingly persistent. For all the valiant efforts that have been made, gender mainstreaming has largely failed live up to its promises. The dilution and depoliticisation of the 'gender agenda' as it has come to be taken up by development institutions calls for more attention to be paid to what it takes to make a difference to women's lives.

The human rights framework offers an invaluable analytical tool with which to think about what can be done to advance the realisation of women's rights. Its emphasis on the indivisibility, integrity and interdependence of human rights draws attention to the interconnections between different spheres of women's lives. This paper highlights two 'entry-level' rights - women's rights over their bodies and the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives - which are, it is argued, are fundamental to all other rights. It suggests that greater attention needs to be given to measures that enable women to realise these rights as preconditions for equitable development.

## Women, Rights and Development

There is virtually unanimous support among governments and international agencies for the idea that getting more women into work and addressing the gendered inequities in political representation is good for development. Women, it is argued, are more

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likely to devote their earnings to the wellbeing of their families, more inclined to get involved in activities that support their communities, less likely to resort to corrupt practices when in government and better champions for improved health and education in local governance. Some agencies go as far as suggesting that women are the motor for the kind of changes that need to happen to lift families, communities and nations out of poverty.

Yet amidst this declared support for increasing the number of women workers and representatives, there is no such agreement on the importance of promoting and protecting the basic rights that are needed to enable women to go to work, participate as citizens and take up demanding roles as politicians. The opening up of the global marketplace has brought with it increasingly fragile access to social rights. In some countries, economic reforms have further imperilled women's abilities to combine productive work with the demands that continue to be placed upon them as carers. While innovative initiatives appear to be beginning to change the risky and violent behaviour of some men, issues such as unequal pay, unequal access to political representation and the grossly unfair domestic burdens placed on women remain largely unaddressed by efforts to 'involve men' and sorely neglected by those men who have become involved in gender work.

Revitalizing the 'gender agenda' in development calls for renewed attention to be paid not only to what it is that brings about positive change in women's lives, but what is holding women back. Women cannot go to work if they are unable to secure decent childcare and have some control over the number of children they have. Nor can they survive and thrive in the workplace if they are continued to be expected to maintain their homes unaided by male partners and kin. Without access to the means to regulate their fertility, there is little chance of women having the time and energy to participate in community affairs or politics until their children are grown up - unless they are of sufficiently elite status to be able to employ others to take care of their children and households for them. Women cannot get involved in politics, at whatever level, without access to the opportunities for political apprenticeship, connections and resources enjoyed by many men. Nor will they want to go into politics if they are subjected to sexual and moral harassment from men in the political arena.

Women's civil and political rights, then, are placed in jeopardy where women lack social and economic rights. And women's social and economic rights may come to depend on having greater and more effective representation in policy and political institutions which make the decisions that affect women's lives. Yet in order for women to enjoy their social, economic, cultural, civil and political rights, they need first to be able to enjoy two basic rights: rights over their bodies and the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives. These 'entry-level' rights are fundamental to the enjoyment of any other rights.

### **Sexual and Reproductive Rights**

Sexual and reproductive rights have become a battleground on which questions of religious morality have come to take precedence over concerns about what the denial of these rights really means to women's lives, well-being and opportunities. These rights are deeply entwined with rights that have been the source of less controversy, such as rights to health and education. Girls cannot go to or remain at school if they are subjected to sexual harassment. Restrictions on the provision of sexual and reproductive health services to non-married women, especially adolescent girls, place their lives and wellbeing at risk. The incidence of HIV infection in women and rates of maternal mortality are powerful indicators of the consequences of denying women sexual and reproductive rights.

Many countries continue to deny women the right to choose when and whether to have children, a key demand of the Beijing Platform for Action. In many of these countries, women's right to a sexuality of their own choosing is also denied to them. Those who depart from the norm of heterosexual marriage face discrimination in their communities and workplaces, which can extend to an outright denial of their right to exist. The failure of many states to guarantee women their sexual and reproductive rights has far reaching economic and political consequences. As Nicole Bidegain of REDLAC (The Latin American and Caribbean Youth Network for Sexual and Reproductive Rights) put it:

Sexual and reproductive rights are part of citizenship, because if you can't decide for your own body, you can't decide for the destiny of your country, for the UN, for anything.<sup>1</sup>

The failure to address the inextricable connections between rights over the body and other fundamental human rights costs lives and jeopardizes development. One of the most powerful examples of these interconnections arises in respect of abortion. An estimated 20 million women are forced to have clandestine and unsafe abortions every year. Tens of thousands of these women die as a result - the vast majority of whom are those who are marginalised by their poverty. For the estimated six million women annually who survive unsafe abortion but suffer often life-threatening complications, the costs of the denial of this right gain broader economic and social dimensions.

A recent workshop at the Institute of Development Studies explored the global economic costs of unsafe abortion related morbidity and mortality, and found these costs to be substantial.<sup>2</sup> In many countries where abortion is illegal, post-abortion complications are not only a leading cause of maternal death, but of maternal morbidity, stretching scarce resources for maternity care and removing productive members of the family from income-generating and care-giving activities that are vital for household survival.

There is little prospect of meeting MDG5 unless governments take up the challenge of reducing the incidence of maternal deaths that arise as a direct consequence of a lack of access to safe abortion and aftercare. Punitive measures against those seeking or providing abortion leaves women ever more vulnerable to the risk of death and impaired fertility. Many of those who die or suffer permanent impairment to their fertility are teenagers, who are often denied even the most basic sexuality education and sexual and reproductive service provision.

The incidence of abortion-related maternal morbidity and mortality in countries where abortion remains illegal is sufficient proof that proscription simply does not work.<sup>3</sup> And there is mounting evidence on the ineffectiveness of abstinence-only programmes, which suggests that measures that seek to encourage young people to avoid sex rather than teach them about their bodies and about how to prevent pregnancy are no answer.<sup>4</sup>

What these and other studies demonstrate is the need for greater commitment on the part of governments to providing both comprehensive sexuality education and the

essential services needed to support women of all ages to secure sexual and reproductive wellbeing. If progress is to be made towards realising human rights for all, it is critical that the real costs of the denial of women's sexual and reproductive rights are frankly acknowledged. In the face of so much needless death and suffering, there is a strong economic as well as moral and political case to be made for greater realism about quite how significant a threat the denial of these rights poses to women's abilities to enjoy any other rights.

### **The Right to Participate**

In the case of women's rights to participate, far more needs to be done to go beyond measures to increase the *formal* representation of women to enhancing their *substantive* participation in decision-making at all levels.

More and more women are entering the political arena. But in most countries, there is a long way to go before women are equitably represented in political office. While measures such as quotas or reservations may be necessary, they are far from sufficient to address the considerable barriers that women face in claiming their right to participate.<sup>5</sup> And it is now well acknowledged that increasing the numbers of women in politics is no guarantee that those women who enter the political arena will promote and defend women's rights.

Initiatives such as Brazil's *Mulher e Democracia* programme, which runs 'feminist schools' for women representatives in the legislative and executive branches of government, recognise that for women to be effective in advocating women's rights, they need not only enhanced political skills, but also new connections and new knowledge on the basis of which to make the case for women's rights.<sup>6</sup> Such 'schools' provide a learning environment that can foster new leaders, as well as increase the effectiveness of those who are already in politics.

If women's political participation is now recognised as so important for development, governments have a vital role to play in supporting and enabling women to exercise their rights to participate, at all levels. Changing the cultures of politics that present such a formidable barrier for women's political engagement in many countries is a slow, difficult process: there are no quick-fix solutions. Yet there are some practical

measures that governments can take. One is to reform political institutions to make them more accessible for women who have children - such as providing crèche facilities, and holding meetings at times and in places that permit women with domestic responsibilities to take part - and more inclusive for all. Another is to lend financial, political and institutional support to scaling up initiatives like the Brazilian feminist schools and the training courses that have been used to such effect by feminist NGOs in countries like India to equip women with the knowledge, confidence and skills to enter and be effective in the political arena.

Yet a note of caution also needs to be sounded: a focus on increasing women's agency within existing constraints does not do enough to tackle the root causes of women's political exclusion. If women are to realise their rights to participate as *citizens*, rather than as tokens or proxies, far more needs to be done to reform the very basis of politics. This calls for broadening and deepening opportunities for political engagement at all levels, *democratising democracy* to open up politics and decision-making to a greater diversity of people. It calls for coalition-building between progressive social and political actors who may at present have little to say to each other, that can harness their common interests in creating a fairer world to the pursuit of greater justice and equality for *all*. And it calls for building constituencies who will vote for and demand from their governments a commitment to women's rights as *human rights*.

### **Realising women's rights**

The rights that are defined in international human rights conventions - notably CEDAW - offer the promise of greater equality for women. But to turn rights on paper into substantive opportunities for women to enjoy those rights requires renewed attention to be paid to the entry-level rights identified here.

Champions of women's rights in high political office - men as well as women - have a vital role to play in the realisation of women's rights. They can do much to pressurise their governments to address the contradictions between procedures, practices and funding mechanisms and what needs to be actually done to advance women's rights. Those in aid-giving as well as aid-receiving countries can make much of the human rights framework as a lens through which to analyse and monitor the effects of changing aid funding frameworks, and to hold to account those governments who

promote policies and priorities that do little to promote, respect, or protect women's rights.

Equally, there is a lot that aid-giving countries can do to support the realisation of women's rights through development financing. Yet there is a perverse disjuncture between talk about the importance of promoting gender equality and women's empowerment and the current architecture of aid. A recent workshop organized by the Association of Women in Development highlights the effects of the shifts in the funding environment for women's rights.<sup>7</sup> Its findings need to be taken very seriously indeed. They indicate that far more support is needed for programmes that can make a difference to the realisation of women's rights. These include leadership training for would-be female politicians, capacity building for women representatives at all levels so that they can acquire and exercise the skills that are needed to make effective arguments for women's rights, and support for the institutionalization of sexuality education programmes and provision of the basic sexual and reproductive health services that not only guarantee women's rights, but also save women's lives.

The progressive realisation of human rights depends on identifying priorities for change that can support, if not also accelerate, progress in other areas. Used as an analytical framework that can help to identify entry points for change, the human rights framework becomes a powerful instrument for assessing where governments can make the most difference to advancing greater equality and justice for all. The human rights principles of indivisibility and integrality offer advocates of women's rights and empowerment tools for thought and action that can help move beyond piecemeal interventions. These principles guide us towards the necessity of addressing the entry-level rights identified here as an urgent priority for action.

#### **Notes**

1. <http://www.iwhc.org/resources/nb011105.cfm>
2. Economic Costs of Abortion Related Morbidity and Mortality, workshop held at the Institute of Development Studies, Brighton, UK, 17-18 April 2007.
3. See, for example, <http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/2006/08/08/Nigeria-UP-IA.pdf>
4. <http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/publications/PDFs/impactabstinence.pdf>
5. <http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/news/Archive2005/AnneMarieBeijing.html>
6. <http://www.cmnmulheredemocracia.org.br>
7. See [www.awid.org/moneyandmovements/](http://www.awid.org/moneyandmovements/)